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A STORM-CENTRE IN THEOLOGY.

BY THE REV. NEWMAN SMYTH, D.D.

THE American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions is a close corporation which was organized in the year 1810 for the immediate purpose of sending certain young men as missionaries to the heathen. Its administration is entrusted to several general secretaries, who act under the advice of a Prudential Committee. Practically, though not formally, the secretaries have chosen fit persons to serve on the Prudential Committee, the committee, with the secretaries, have nominated proper members of the corporation, and the corporate members have periodically reëlected the secretaries and committee. For years nothing happened to disturb this safe and amicable understanding. And the board, under this method of management, has achieved an honorable record of missionary success.

Recently, however, the American Board has become a storm-centre of theological controversy ; and besides the special interest which naturally accompanies the reports of a great missionary enterprise, its next annual meeting, which is to be held in New York in October, will attract the attention generally of observers of the conditions and progress of religious thought in this country. It is necessary to review the course of events which have invested a foreign missionary society with this unusual interest, in order that the recent controversy in the American Board may be made intelligible to the general reader, and that the principles and position of the so-called liberal or progressive body of men among its Congregational constituency may be fairly understood.

During the earlier years of its history many theological storms swept over New England, but the American Board was happily kept clear from them all. Its original intention, to which during the best years of its history it has been held steadfast, cannot

be better described than in these words, which one of its former secretaries used in explaining the constitution of the board: "How entirely aloof has it stood from party, belonging to none, claimed by none, employed by none! It makes no appeal to sectarian or party feelings." In 1871 the board distinctly declared that it was not to be regarded as a theological court. But at the annual meeting which was held in Portland in 1882 the clear missionary voice of the board seemed to be disturbed by an undertone of theological anxiety. Its best friends, however, hoped that this was but a discordant echo which had been borne into its proper discussions from outside, and they would not believe that any serious intention could be cherished of using a foreign missionary society for purposes of domestic theological correction. None were more astonished than the liberal men within the denomination from which the board mainly derives its support when, a few years later, they learned that the Prudential Committee had begun to use their authority for purposes of theological discrimination. The liberal leaders, apprehending the disaster which might befall the board, should it allow itself to be dragged into a pending theological discussion, succeeded in keeping from the newspapers for several months the complaints which had come to their knowledge of the rejection, for supposed theological reasons, of an estimable lady teacher by the officers of the board. Further cases of proscription, however, followed, and when all other private means of preventing what seemed to be the outbreak of a needless controversy had failed, it is a matter of unwritten history that as a last resort, at the solicitation of liberal men, the venerable Dr. Mark Hopkins, then president of the American Board, visited Boston and threw the whole weight of his influence on the side of conciliation and practical Christian comprehension. His effort proved of no avail; the Prudential Committee persisted in the policy of theological proscription which they had conscientiously adopted, and the open and memorable debate at Des Moines became the inevitable consequence.

The position which President Hopkins took upon that day has been ever since the main position of the liberal minority in the board. He maintained that "the Prudential Committee is not a theological committee," and that the board should not be used "as a make-weight in a theological controversy." The liberals declined then, as they have always refused, to advocate on

the platform of the board the particular doctrinal opinions which they are supposed to hold; but they pleaded for a policy of non-interference, and of practical comprehension to be restricted only by the limits of fellowship within the constituency of the board.

The controversy thus begun became intensified during the following year, attracting wide notice on account of what was known as the case of Mr. Hume. That able and successful missionary of the board had been arraigned by the Prudential Committee for some remarks which he had made in an after-dinner speech at Andover; the place where he was bold enough to speak, as well as the few words which he uttered, having much to do with the offence which was taken in the rooms of the board. The whole history of the trials and tribulations through which that devoted Christian man was at length suffered to go on his way by his brethren has never been written: those personally conversant with the facts might relate how he was called upon to make statement after statement of his theological position; how, when the committee seemed unable to understand his repeated explanations of his views and he had asked for an ecclesiastical council to inquire into his orthodoxy, that request was ignored, while still further examinations, oral and written, were instituted by different officers of the board; and how at last, under a rising storm of public indignation, this Christian man was grudgingly permitted to carry the water of life to the heathen;—all this tribulation, to those familiar with the whole trial of Mr. Hume, forming one of the most surprising instances of the survival of mediævalism in the nineteenth century. I do not imagine that it would have taken the Apostle Paul five minutes to decide whether a man like Mr. Hume should be suffered to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles; and even the conservative St. James would have required of him no further promise than Mr. Hume's whole career showed that he was peculiarly fitted to give,—no greater burden than such things as may seem necessary for peace. To the general student of religious history this treatment of Mr. Hume in the rooms of the Prudential Committee furnishes interesting material for the better understanding of the psychology of the Inquisition.

The controversy in the American Board, thus inaugurated and intensified, reached a climax at its meeting in 1887 in Springfield. In the action which was then taken by the board there was no

ambiguity. The progressives have since accepted it as a distinct announcement and authorization of the policy of proscription and exclusion which had been asserted by the Home Secretary. Men representing almost every important educational interest in New England, men who had long been recognized as sound and able leaders of their denomination, men, too, who spoke for churches that make the largest contributions to the treasury of the board, urged the opposite policy of comprehension, and protested against the assumption of theological authority by the Prudential Committee; but they were outvoted, and their plea for toleration signally failed. The Rev. Dr. Storrs, who had been placed in a somewhat embarrassing position by the partisanship which had taken cover under his wide reputation, after much hesitancy accepted the presidency of the board to which he had been elected by the majority, and wrote a letter of acceptance which was doubtless intended to be conciliatory. The liberals did not desire to embarrass any effort at conciliation which Dr. Storrs might make, and accordingly they have waited to see what fruit, if any, his influence might bear, although they have not been blind to the fact that Dr. Storrs's letter, at best, offered only an attempt to find a point of ecclesiastical equilibrium somewhere midway upon a sliding theological scale, and was not an effort to settle a disturbing question upon some fixed and permanent principle. But wishing to allow ample time for the majority to effect any possible alleviation of the situation, the progressives generally absented themselves from the next annual meeting at Cleveland, and made no motion to confuse the responsibility for the policy of the board which rested upon the majority. With the exception of the inauguration of a movement looking towards a future reorganization of the board on a more representative basis, nothing, however, of importance was attempted by the party of the majority at Cleveland.

One other and an important fact belongs to this chapter of ecclesiastical history. Subsequently to the last meeting of the board the Berkeley Temple, a Congregational church in Boston, by the advice of a council, took action to send, independently of the board if necessary, one of its members, to whom a missionary commission had already been refused by the Prudential Committee. Having been a second time rejected by that committee, he has been sent by his church to Japan, where he is now working in cordial coöperation with the missionaries of the board.

Such in brief has been the course of the recent controversy in the American Board.

If in this rapid review of it I have not yet mentioned the theological question which has been made prominent in the discussion, it is because from the first it has seemed to me to be the accidental point of collision between different tempers of mind and tendencies of thought, and not the real and essential principle at issue, so far, at least, as pertains to the conduct of a missionary society. Storm-centres of theological discussion are constantly shifting; providentially the area of low pressure does not always remain over the same region of thought. Had a minute examination, like that to which candidates have been subjected by the secretaries touching their hope for the future life, been instituted with regard to their views on the nature of the sources and documents contained in our sacred Scriptures, the point of theological stress and difficulty might have been changed. But whatever may be now or another day the particular doctrine which the progress of thought may summon for reëxamination in the minds of men, the contention of the liberals is that the practical work of the church should not be made to rise or fall with the theological barometer, but should be kept broadly and generously true to the main Christian purpose and life of the churches.

At its meeting in October the board will have before it some results, already becoming evident, of the policy of exclusion which has now been in practical operation for three years.

It appears that the conciliatory letter of Dr. Storrs has had little appreciable effect in changing the conduct of the Prudential Committee. The door does not yet seem to stand much farther ajar, or to swing open more easily to missionary candidates who are suspected of adding too much knowledge of German or recent English theology to their graces of piety. At least, some recent correspondence with reference to the possible appointment of such persons has not proved sufficiently encouraging to warrant its continuance. Practically three theological seminaries, supported by the Congregationalists, are shut out from participation in its board of foreign missions. Individuals from these seminaries may slip in, but, as a class, those who are educated in them, who receive their best spirit, must look elsewhere than to the American Board for terms of honorable Christian service. Young men

who may venture to admit into their thinking any larger hope for multitudes of men than consistent Calvinism or "the faith once delivered to the saints" of the seventeenth century can allow, may find plainly written for their warning over the door to the Home Secretary's office the words which Dante saw when he approached the gate of the Inferno—"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." The secretaries, indeed, continue to invite these young men to come; but they are naturally reluctant to accept the bonds held up for them to put upon their reasons, and from which, as pastors of our churches, they would find themselves free. The present theological committee of the board have sought to meet this emergency, which their policy has created, by looking for more docile, not to say more learned, men in Canada!

Another natural result of this policy of proscription which is already becoming obvious to those in a position to observe it, and which will become more painfully evident the longer the present policy is persisted in, is the deterioration of the missionary service. The strongest, most independent young men cannot for a period of years be turned aside without serious loss to the future efficiency of our missions. President Hopkins, with a flash of sagacious wit, once remarked that there was danger that the American Board would become "an old men's society." If that prophecy is not to hasten to disastrous fulfilment, obviously the board must be administered by officers in touch with the life now stirring among men, and who can understand, without numberless examinations, what is going on in the minds of young men.

The gradual effect upon the finances of the board of a persistent policy of exclusion presents another problem which may profitably receive consideration at its next meeting. The financial honor of the American Board has never been impeached. Not a dollar contributed to it has been lost by those to whom its funds have been intrusted. They justly deserve the continued confidence of the churches. Nevertheless, its present financial condition is a matter for serious consideration. Had it not been for a liberal use of two large legacies, one of which is supposed to be used for the development of new missions, and the other of which, by vote of the board, was "set apart to meet special calls," an unfortunate gap would ere this have become apparent between the ordinary receipts and the needed appropriations of the board. The published reports of the treasurer do not disclose the exact

extent of this difference between the annual receipts and the amounts required to keep missions up to existing standards of efficiency. Only an itemized account of the alleged "special calls" for which large drafts have been made during the past five years upon these legacies, can reveal the exact financial condition of the board. I doubt if the Home Secretary would admit in the exegesis of his favorite Biblical texts the liberal principles of linguistic interpretation which are suggested by an attempt to discover for what "special calls" so large a draft as \$154,000 was made in one year upon the Swett legacy of the board. We would not be misunderstood as questioning the judiciousness of that expenditure ; doubtless the exigencies of the service called for it ; but we would suggest that, in order that the exact financial condition and prospects of the board may be fully disclosed, an itemized account of these drafts for the past few years should be forthcoming.

Thus far the progressives have loyally continued their contributions for the support of existing missions; but the responsibility for the effect upon the finances of the board of a policy of exclusion rests upon the majority. While the theological party now administering the American Board are occupied in the somewhat unfortunate attempt to exclude from it those whom they regard as heretics, they should not suffer the board to slip blindly too near the edge of a financial precipice. We, on our part, do not disguise our fear that a prolonged policy of proscription and division will naturally result in financial, as well as moral and intellectual, loss to the board and its missions.

The effect of this division policy upon the efficiency of our missionaries in the field is another result of it already coming within the range of prediction. Were the action which was taken at Springfield consistently pressed, it would involve the recall of some of our ablest missionaries. It would mean also the offer to the heathen of the theology of a portion of the board, or the dogma of a secretary of the board, as the condition of Christian communion. "Japan," said an intelligent Japanese student, "does not want your New England theology ; it does need your American Christianity." The problem still before the American Board might be reduced to that simple statement of it : what will you decree to send to India or Japan— a stone from your dogmatic quarry or the bread of life ? a provincial theology or a catholic Christianity ?

The remonstrants, or protestants, within the American Board are not a party bound by any special theological covenant. The particular doctrinal point which in recent discussions has been much debated is the hope entertained by some among them that somewhere, and somehow, there shall be found one gracious opportunity, there shall be afforded by the God who is no respecter of persons one Christian probation, for all men. It does not seem to those who harbor this hope to be a very revolutionary, or unreasonable, or unscriptural view ; but by none of them is it put in the first line of the simple and grand Christian affirmations. It belongs, with all similar answers to moral difficulties in Christian doctrine, to the second or third line of the inferences which may be suggested by the Scriptures, or the hopes love may conceive of amid the troubled visions of faith. The progressives, as for want of a common name they may for convenience be designated, are by no means agreed in their theological thinking. They dwell in the same ancestral home in the unity of the Spirit ; but they throw open different windows of outlook towards the far horizons of God's purpose. They are agreed in their reverence and love for their common Christian hearth, and also they act together in opposing the locking any doors by which knowledge from far or near may enter, or the darkening of any windows through which speculative thought may gain vision of realities beyond knowledge. They are not contending within the American Board for any private opinion which may be entertained among them ; but they would keep room in their churches for a fearless faith, and in the work of their denomination they would pursue a policy of enlightened charity. They deem it far wiser and safer to trust young men with Christianity, and to trust Christianity to such young men as have been refused commissions by the board, than to put them in bonds to the somewhat modern theological traditions which the Home Secretary has commended to the faithful in his recent revised and emended edition of the Apostles' Creed.

From the outset, the protestants in the American Board have refused to be driven into a schismatic position. Theirs, too, are the fathers, and they mean, so far as lieth in them, to live peaceably with their brethren. Thus far they have had little difficulty in doing so outside the American Board. Ecclesiastical councils, east and west, with unbroken unanimity, have declared for toleration and practical comprehension within the denomination.

Only within the close corporation of the American Board has schism been invited. Into that sin of schism the liberals do not propose to be driven. They are bound by their whole spirit not to be schismatic; they are also compelled by the positive force of their faiths not to rest content with a merely negative position in any evangelical or Christian work. The key to their solution of their double obligation of fidelity to the American Board and of faithfulness also to the cause of missions, is found in the action, already narrated, by which, with the advice of a Congregational council, an independent missionary has been sent by a particular church to coöperate with missionaries appointed by the board. Whether other churches may have occasion to send still other men in a similar independent but friendly way will depend largely upon what the majority at the next meeting of the board may judge to be their responsibility for the still unrepealed, and as yet officially unmodified, policy of proscription adopted at Springfield.

It is not for us to foresee whether the conservative reaction from that extreme position, many signs of which have appeared, will make itself sufficiently felt to effect any practical alleviation of the situation at the October meeting. We do not venture to predict whether any benign influence may then arrest a course of administration whose deteriorating and disintegrating effects upon a great cause are already too plainly evident. It is not easy always to open the eyes even of good men that they may see what is going on around them. But so long as the action which was taken at Springfield remains unmodified or unrepealed, unofficial or private mollifications of it, though well meant, do not clearly relieve the situation. If any helpful action is taken by the board in New York, it is to be hoped that it may be explicit. Whether at that time the minority may choose to wait still longer in quietness, or to renew their protest and their plea for toleration, time and circumstances will determine. But whatever may be done, or left undone, at the coming meeting in New York, the protestant minority, the party of comprehension, within the American Board may confidently wait and work, deprecating indeed the temporary loss to Christian missions which results from a policy of proscription, but believing that in time Christian charity and common-sense will settle generously and happily this whole needless and wasteful controversy.

NEWMAN SMYTH.